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From Function to Competence: Engaging with the New Politics of Family

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Abstract

This paper argues for a critical reclaiming of family and highlights the risks associated with decentring such a powerful and pervasive concept. Influential critiques of family as an organising category are considered in the context of a contemporary trend towards reorienting it within broader studies foregrounding personal and intimate realms of human connectedness. It is suggested that while concepts of personal lives and intimacy have much to offer they can not capture the full range and nature of relations raised through the lens of family. In particular the political consequences of subsuming family within wider approaches are set out through reference to a new public politics of family in which emphasis is placed less on structure and function, and more on knowledge and competence. Through an exploration of the key changes characterising this shift a case is made for retaining family (alongside intimacy and personal life) as a flexible, enduring and necessary sociological framework.

Keywords: Family, Politics, Intimacy and Personal Lives, Policy

Introduction

1.1 Few can doubt the central role family meanings play in personal, social and political life. Yet sociologists have struggled to properly address and capture this significance. Family studies have remained a relatively subsidiary topic within the discipline, seen by many as lacking the appeal and theoretical depth of other heavyweight subject areas. Instead, broader, alternative concerns with intimacies and close relationships have captured the sociological imagination, largely consigning family experiences to personal and emotional realms. In this paper I draw out the contemporary political connotations of decentring family in this way. I begin with a critical contextualisation of the new sociological interest in the personal, showing how (like previous notions of 'the family') it occupies a particular historical, cultural and political location. I suggest that this perspective promotes an important but inevitably partial view of individual connected lives. Meanwhile, family as distinctively social and political phenomena has evolved and now operates largely outside of the mainstream sociological gaze. More specifically I highlight how moral constructions of family have shifted away from concerns with function and structure to embrace a new orthodoxy of 'competence'. Through an exploration of these changes I argue the case for a critical reclaiming of family as a flexible, enduring and very necessary sociological framework.

Families and personal lives

2.1 The study of family has a notable history of being subsumed within other theories and topics or overshadowed by alternative interests. The grand functionalist theories of Talcott Parsons' (1951) and Marxism positioned family as a crucial cog in the wheel of considerably larger systems while the dominant sociological theme of community encompassed much of the important work done on family in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s the alternative term household gained precedence, largely in response to feminist critiques of family as an ideological construction. Feminism, of course, trained a highly illuminating spotlight on the 'institution' of family, but through a distinct focus on gender and gendered power relations (Morgan 1996). And although the study of family as a crucial social phenomenon was revitalised and to some extent revalidated by new theoretical engagements with discursive constructions (Gubrium and Holstein 1990) and family practices (Morgan 1996, 2011), its sociological significance was once again decentred by broader theoretical shifts prioritising concepts of intimacy and personal relationships.

2.2 This tendency to circumvent the concept of family as a primary organising category has undoubtedly generated important and sophisticated insights into the way relationships are lived and understood. In particular, theorists over the last few decades have produced an extensive body of work founded on alternative approaches to the study of human connectedness (eg. Smart 2007; Weeks 2007; Plummer 2003; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001; Jamieson 1998; Stacey 1996). Driven by a desire to explore the diversity of intimate associations and to escape the conceptual shackles of family terminology, writers forged new directions, foregrounding the quality rather than the structure or status of relationships. At the same time prominent, mainstream sociological theorists developed formative accounts of a new social order and consciousness, claiming a profound transformation in the way we relate to one another (Beck

and Beck Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Beck Gernsheim 1998; Giddens 1991, 1992). The breath and scope of this thesis prompted something of a paradigm shift in sociology. The individual has increasingly come to be seen as the core unit of social life, prompting a new focus on choice, agency and the negotiation of risk. From the perspective of Ulrich Beck (2002) globalised economic forces have displaced the social structures underpinning family, reducing it to one of many 'zombie categories' whose repute far outweigh their conceptual usefulness.

2.3 A corollary of these theoretical developments has been the opening up of personal and interpersonal frontiers previously beyond the sociological imaginary. More specifically, interest in emotionality, memory and biography now regularly shape analyses, employing concepts that have more traditionally been associated with psychology and psychoanalysis (Smart 2007). This contemporary attentiveness to the personal coincides with what many have identified as a 'therapeutic turn' in Western society. The last decade or so has seen a huge surge in the significance attributed to feelings and introspective analysis as a means of understanding and addressing long standing social issues and problems (Ecclestone and Hays 2008; Illouz 2008; Furedi 2004). This contemporary preoccupation is played out across a range of sites with therapeutic discourse now pervading cultural understandings and representations. For example, emotionality as an approach has spread across formal structural and social networks, spanning the arenas of business, media, politics, education, welfare and criminal justice, re-shaping cultural meanings and practices. New sociological directions might be seen as following this tide, although some writers have undertaken a more critical analysis of the political dynamics underpinning the take up of such ideas. (Burman 2009; Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Moskowitz, 2001).

2.4 In contextualising a new sociological interest in the personal my intention is not to question its value or potential to continue producing important insights into family and other relationships. My doubts concern the capacity of this particular theoretical frame to wholly contain family without obscuring its particular qualities. Sidestepping wider debates about whether meaningful relationships increasingly take place outside of family, few would deny the continued relevance of family as both an experience and an ideal. Even in a context of progressive diversity, many, if not most, remain invested in a notion of family as a bounded unit. A focus on personal life offers only part of the picture. More than one perspective offers a fuller and more integrated view of relational lives and that this requires a centring and well as decentring of family.

2.5 Claims by Beck 2002 and others (Beck and Beck Gernsheim1995; Roseneil and Budegeon 2004; Smart 2007) that sociology has outgrown its use for family as a primary conceptual tool tend to be characterised by certain optimism, both about the nature of social change and the politics of the personal. Transformations in relationships and sensibilities are viewed as rendering family incapable of encompassing the myriad of meaningful connections which permeate people's lives, with the word imposing unhelpful normative boundaries. Terms such as 'personal' and 'intimate' are presented as more neutral alternatives enabling more fluid and sensitive understandings of the ways in which family has been transcended (Smart 2007). Such claims are contested by some feminists who argue that this shift has largely eclipsed longstanding and enduring concerns that were previously articulated through the language of family, most particularly in terms of gendered experiences of childrearing (Edwards and Gillies forthcoming; Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2002). Michael Gilding (2010) has also critiqued what he describes as 'the new orthodoxy' of personal life in sociology, claiming it exaggerates fluidity and reflexivity at the expense of enduring the normativities and conventions of family.

2.6 As this debate highlights there can be no neutral language informing the study of this topic. While the term family inevitably carries considerable ideological baggage references to the personal have become just as charged. In recent years the personal has become politicised in a way that was never envisaged by second wave feminists. As Nikolas Rose (2002) notes, contemporary governmentality, is founded on an active sphere of the 'personal' through which individuals are forced to embrace their individualized citizenship and become 'responsible risk takers' (Giddens 1998). Rose describes:

> a regime of the self where competent personhood is thought to depend upon the continual exercise of freedom, and where one is encouraged to understand one's life, actually or potentially, not in terms of fate or social status, but in terms of one's success or failure acquiring the skills and making the choices to actualize oneself' (Rose, 2002:87)

2.7 From the perspective of most current Western Governments individuals must be enabled to appropriately manage this freedom, requiring regular intervention at the level of personal in the form of advice, training, expert consultation and sanctions for making the wrong choice (Gillies 2008). Following this logic policy has been characterised by an intensive personalisation of socially located trajectories such as education, employment and health, with family becoming similarly positioned as a personal project, albeit with particularly strong social responsibilities. As I will outline in this paper, family has taken on a whole new political significance as the formative site through which 'competent personhood' is cultivated. Childrearing and the family relationships that constitute it have been heavily risk assessed by policy makers keen to ensure parents and other family members make the 'right' choices in their daily interactions. As a result much of the everyday minutiae of personal and domestic lives have come to be viewed as appropriate targets for state intervention. In UK politics a cross party consensus has grown up around the need for guidance and support in managing family interactions. As was summed up by Ed Balls, the Children's Secretary in 2009, 'relationships are now firmly on the agenda.'[1]

2.8 I will elaborate on this new personal and family politics further on in this paper, but for now I want to make the point that this subject matter is inherently political, regardless of the perspective adopted. A sociological approach that uncritically embraces 'the personal' risks being incorporated into this 'regime of the self' in the same way that family sociology of the past came to reinforce simplistic accounts of 'the family'. Rather than attempting to side step ideological 'baggage' it might be more productive to actively incorporate this dimension into analytical frameworks. This would mean explicitly examining how ways of understanding are inevitably culturally, politically, morally and ethically located. Distinct frameworks can then be used in more strategic 'knowing' ways as conceptual tools.

2.9 In pursuing this suggestion the extent to which intimacy and 'the personal' as a theoretical framework necessarily operates through a prioritising focus on the individual needs to be addressed (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2002). While Carol Smart (2007) stresses the socially embedded nature of 'the personal', this relational sphere implies agency and at least some control. As Jane McCarthy (forthcoming)

suggests this may represent a culturally specific, Western viewpoint obscuring how personal relations may at times be subsumed by a more collective experience. She discusses a continuum of relational experience with personal lives and family lives overlapping but spanning opposite ends. From this perspective, an either or focus would obscure as much as they reveal. In short, the distinct conceptual frameworks of family and personal relationships face similar but different objections. Both might be accused of reinforcing regulatory political agendas, of reflecting particular ideological commitments and of marginalising or excluding alternative experiences and values. Doubts might also be voiced about the conceptual reach of both theses broad categories and their capacity to meaningfully address all the different relationships that matter to people. A critical reclaiming of family alongside a similarly critical appropriation of 'the personal' is one way forward.

The problem with family

3.1 Having highlighted some of the conceptual limitations of 'personal relationships' and advocated a reclaiming of 'family' as a necessary additional lens, it is useful to explore why the concept of family has been so consistently overlooked and or opposed in sociology. As David Morgan (1996) suggests early theorists may have viewed domesticity as too dull and small scale to warrant much consideration in its own right, reflecting a male dominated concern with social order, structure and change. Everyday experiences of family were normalised, naturalised and made largely invisible until feminists revealed the extent to which women's oppression was sustained through the ideology and practice of 'the family'. In the wake of this insightful and comprehensive challenge sociologists were forced to jettison any notion that family was a distinct, definable object and re-evaluate its conceptual usefulness. While some broadened their sights and talked instead of 'families' and family relationships others came to see engagement with the language of family as complicit and politically insensitive.

3.2 Jon Bernardes (1999: 23) claimed recognition of change and diversity was not enough to redeem such a narrow and exclusory framework, arguing that sociological appropriation of the term family easily reverts to type in the heads of 'ordinary people'. The theoretical problem of 'the family' was, he suggested, so extensive it rendered any academic definitions of the word unsound and conceptually unsustainable. Highlighting the extent to which particular boundaried notions of family inform a range of social questions, Bernardes claimed family researchers inevitably impose meanings and evaluations, with potentially harmful social and political consequences. Similarly Jo Van Every (1999) suggested that British family sociologists have helped to construct and enforce hetero-normative values through a common focus on households consisting of mothers, fathers and children. While sparking an interesting discussion it might be argued that such claims raise more questions about the capacity of sociology as a discipline than the place of family in current debates. The suggestion that dominant frameworks of meaning and experience should be avoided for fear of reproducing and reaffirming them seems to suggest both a lack of faith in the critical sophistication of sociologists alongside an arguably overinflated sense of their power and influence in society. A problematisation of the cultural dominance of family might alternatively be viewed as demanding a critical and politically informed analysis of how and why this continues to be the case.

3.3 A more commonly raised objection to a theoretical foregrounding of family is the claim that relationships are fast changing and are no longer adequately described by the notion of family. For example, Shelley Budgeon and Sasha Roseneil (2004: 135) argue for an alternative focus on networks and flows of intimacy, suggesting that: 'much that matters to people in terms of intimacy and care increasingly takes place beyond the 'family', between partners who are not living together 'as family', and within networks of friends'. Claims that the experience of family is being increasingly replaced by broader and more fluid associations are contestable and contested (Jamieson 1998, Jamieson et al. 2006). Debates largely centre on the demographic trends which show greater diversity in living arrangements. For some this evidences the demise of family frameworks and the ascendance of new confluent relationally (Beck, Beck Gernsheim 1995; Pahl 2000). Others note the extent to which more traditional ties and values still hold sway in the majority of households (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2002). Narratives of transformation might also be viewed in the context of a general sociological fixation with identifying and theorising change at the expense of continuity (Gillies 2008). And, as has been pointed out, diversity and plurality have long been a feature of family relationships (Crow 2002; Stanley 1992; Vascovics 1991).

3.4 Doubts as to whether family remains a useful conceptual tool share parallels with previous sociological debates about the relevance of class.[2] The new individualised age of modernity described by Beck and Giddens casts class (alongside family) on the theoretical scrapheap. While sociologists were struggling to define categories of class, similar arguments were being made about its inability to describe a dramatically altered social and economic landscape. A new preoccupation with identity politics took precedence and the topic of class dropped off the academic agenda until it was rescued by feminists in the mid to late 1990s. Crucially, the concept of class (re-worked as dynamic, symbolic and culturally produced) illuminated the essentially social nature of inequality, counterposing prevailing accounts of choice, risk and identity (Lawler 2000; Sayer 2005; Skeggs 1997, 2004). The framework of family fulfils a similar role in foregrounding a socially constructed structure within which 'personal lives' are more often than not embedded. Significantly, it also allows a systematic analysis of the far reaching power of family discourse. The idea of family infuses social, cultural and personal space impacting on everyone, whether they identify as family members or not. Without recourse to the concept as a central analytic tool we lose sight of how family discourses continue to exclude as well as include.

Changing constructions: from function to competence

4.1 Despite widespread predictions of its demise, family, as it is experienced in everyday life, has shown itself to be a remarkably resilient and flexible set of meanings. Personal and structural dentitions encompass a whole range of permutations and living arrangements, bearing ever less resemblance to the nuclear family spectre haunting many sociologists. Consequently the term family bears a heavy conceptual burden. Its language spans public and private domains, forming a key construct through which meaning is developed, while remaining an intricate, contradictory and often shifting human experience. As David Morgan (1996) notes when people use the descriptive terminology of family to describe a personal experience they draw on culturally and historically embedded meanings. As such family is actively constructed through a complex weaving of the particular and the abstract.

4.2 This general / specific dialectic is encapsulated by the distinction John Gillis (1993) made between 'families we live' with' and 'families we live by', with the former relating to actual lived day to day

experiences while the later encompasses idealised beliefs, myths and longings. These realms are heavily intertwined, with generalised notions of what family ought to be like shaping practices and relationships and vice versa. But this interdependence ensures shoulds and oughts shift over time, both at the level of individual families and family discourse. Families we live by are characterised by a complex, subtle and often conflicting array of representations rather than a closed set of meanings. Old doctrines lose their purchase and new ideals and expectations rise to ascendency, shaping the moral landscape of family. This dynamic process is undetectable unless analysis is directed at the broad level of family. The dismissal of family as a tainted and restrictive framework fails to recognise how the ideology of family has changed dramatically over the last 20 years. The historically located dogma of 'the family' may retain its influence but alongside new, politically driven neo liberal family discourses.

4.3 Arguably, some of the most significant social changes of recent years have taken place in the arena of family policy, with huge consequences for families themselves, particularly those which include children and young people. More specifically governments have come to see families more in terms of their practices than structures, with 'what families do' readily translating into a new ideology of family competence. By way of evidencing this claim I will briefly explore five key, interrelated ways which in public understandings and expectations of family and childrearing have meaningfully shifted in a relatively short time span. A number of sociologists are currently exploring these changes and their impact on parents and children's lives, but as yet there has been little opportunity to link these issues at the broader level of theory.[3]

Family boundaries and the state

5.1 One of the most striking yet under discussed changes in recent years relates to an attempted re-drawing of families boundaries. Since the advent of the New Labour government in1997 there has been a remarkably aggressive attempt to re-position a family life as a public rather than a private concern. Previous legislation and sensibilities which placed everyday personal and family life as largely outside the remit of state intervention have been explicitly challenged through a moral focus on children as the most important constituents of family life. In policy literature the term family is most consistently used to describe households in which children live, with the minutiae of everyday family and parenting practices now systematically linked to 'outcomes' for the child and the health of society as a whole using psychologically informed cause and effect models. While family and parenting have long been targets for crude state involvement in the form of broad brush policies, and intervention in extreme cases, conceptions of 'the family' were characterised by a strongly bounded notion of privacy. Indeed for feminists this ideological separation between public and private was a primary focus for deconstruction. Ideals of domestic privacy and autonomy were shown to conceal and facilitate gendered acts of cruelty, oppression and injustice.

5.2 The extent to which public policy in the UK has pursed a highly interventionist agenda in relation to family and parenting has been well documented (Lind and Keating 2008; Furedi 2008), but in challenging public private divisions, legislation has focused on organisations and institutions as well as families. 'Family friendly' policies in the workplace have forced many employers to facilitate caring responsibilities through provision of flexible working and unpaid leave, while institutions and services are routinely encouraged to consider the needs of families. Perhaps, the clearest example of this transformation in the construction of state / family relations concerns the semi-permeable boundaries that are now expected to be maintained between family homes and schools. The once separate domains of the teacher and parent have become far less distinct. Parental involvement in a child's education is presented as an essential practice, alongside an expectation that opportunities for educational development in the home will consistently be provided. Contractual 'Home School Agreements' can specify the exact nature of these requirements, detailing the number of hours parents are expected to read to children and the written feedback that must be passed to the teacher. More recent policy developments in education go further, encouraging parents to set up and run their own 'free schools' for the benefit of their children and the local community.[4]

5.3 While parents have new pedagogic and in some cases administrative responsibilities schools have been charged with a range of duties more traditionally associated with family practices. Teachers now commonly address emotional and social aspects of pupils' lives without recourse to parents (Gillies 2011). Activities aimed at developing 'emotional literacy' are built into the curriculum at both primary and secondary level. Pupils are also taught how to negotiate and manage social relationships, with peers, family members and other adults (e.g. see DfES 2005). In addition, the remit of schools was extended to the safeguarding and general welfare of their pupils through the introduction of the Every Child Matters (2003) framework.[5] Within this wide reaching policy initiative, teachers are positioned as playing a key role in the early identification of children at risk of harm and are expected to involve themselves in securing the safety and appropriate development of their pupils. This responsibility has been acted out in a variety of ways, including for example lunch box inspections[6] to confiscate unhealthy foods packed by parents, and school intervention in pupil misdemeanours taking place at weekends.[7]

The new significance of 'parenting'

6.1 The legislative and cultural blurring of the boundary between public and private impacts most heavily on the everyday lives and experiences of household's with school age children, reflecting a fundamental change in the meaning and significance attached to the term parent. Once interpreted as an ascribed family relation (like spouse, grandparent or sibling) the word parent is now more commonly viewed an adjective. Mothers and fathers 'parent' children and this task is loaded with moral and practical consequence. Contemporary perspectives tightly tie the wellbeing of society (and that of individual children) to the family practices and parenting techniques pursued. A crucial feature of this change is a re-framing of childrearing as a job requiring particular know how and expertise. Reflecting what Frank Furedi (2008) identified as the creeping 'professionalization' of childrearing, policy makers have sought to establish parenting as a complex skill which must be learnt. 'Knowledge' about childrearing is now portrayed as a necessary resource which parents must have access to in order to fulfil their moral duty as good parents.

6.2 Christina Hardyment (2007) has documented the long history of childrearing advice and manuals and shown how they reflected often widely diverging philosophies. However, recent times have seen the

emergence of a whole new industry and matching workforce with the aim of promoting 'good parenting'. There has been a massive expansion of state sponsored and third sector initiatives directly targeting families under the rubric of 'parenting support'. The term parenting support has become shorthand for parenting classes which detail amongst other things how to play with children, praise them appropriately, handle misbehaviour and develop their educational potential. The notion that there could and should be consensus over what counts as good parenting is increasingly justified through reference to scientific research. Emphasis is placed on assessing the evidence base for particular interventions to ensure successful programmes are reproduced, with little discussion of how 'success' might be defined across diverse cultures and values.

6.3 Working class parents in particular have felt the sharp end of this policy preoccupation with parenting (Gillies 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007, 2008). For those identified as 'deeply excluded', parenting intervention is not optional, as policy literature from successive UK Governments' has made clear. The attribution of poverty to poor parenting through a 'cycle of deprivation' theory has strengthened into a hard line moral and legislative framework. Socially excluded parents, it is claimed should be offered support 'but it is also incumbent on them to take this support' (Cabinet Office 2007: 38). Those who fail to accept such interventions are viewed as morally compromised and warranting of ever-greater use of compulsion such as fines and imprisonment. 'Parenting Orders' designed to force parents to attend classes and adhere to particular rules, have been developed and expanded through a range of legislative acts. Much of the impetus behind this approach derives from an explicit linking of 'anti-social behaviour' and public disorder to parenting deficits (Goldson and Jamieson 2002; Muncie 2009; Tisdall, 2006). Examination of who exactly bears these sanctions reveals a gender specific focus on mothers and mothering lying behind generic references to 'parenting' (Holt 2009).

The centring of children's 'wellbeing'

7.1 The moral impetus behind the changes I have discussed so far relate in the main to a contemporary emphasis on children and their psychological wellbeing. Parenting interventions provide the key measures against which family competence is assessed, drawing on a 'children's needs' discourse to warrant their input. Current interpretations of children's needs are closely tied to those of the neo liberal state, through an instrumental investment in parenting. Individualistic, Western values prioritising autonomy, choice and democracy have been similarly embraced as part of a broad take up of a discourse of 'children's rights'. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified by the UK back in 1991, and a 'Children's Commissioner' was appointed to specifically promote the 'views and best interests of all children'. Somewhat perversely UK support for the UNCRC manages to overlook high rates of child poverty, family homelessness and record numbers of children in custody and focus instead on improving children's sense of wellbeing through the targeting of family, or more specifically parents. Parent child interactions are routinely accorded a causal status in isolation from other family and social relationships and with little reference to their environmental and economic circumstances (Gillies 2008). A cultivational approach to childrearing is advised in the best interests of the child, to inculcate the personal skills, traits and qualifications required in adult life (Lareau 2003).

7.2 A crucial element of this centring of children's wellbeing is an increasing preoccupation with risk and protection (Furedi 2008). While equated with universality and naturalness, the normal development of a child is also presented as a fragile achievement, requiring specific forms of stimulation and careful shielding from stress and negative influences. Concerns over children's safety in public and private spaces, alongside fears of dangerous children themselves have been particularly prominent of late (Walkerdine 2005). More specifically the last few years have seen a number of reports alleging that British children are exceptionally troubled (UNICEF 2007; Gilbert et al 2008; Layard and Dunn 2009), with concerns reaching a fever pitch after rioting and disorder (largely instigated by young people) spread across English towns and cities in the summer of 2011.

7.3 In the context of these anxieties the concept of safeguarding appears to have become a central motif of politics, justifying an unprecedented regulation of children's interactions with adults. For example a 'National Vetting and Barring' scheme was set up in 2009 to assess the suitability (or otherwise) of those working with children. Emphasis has also been placed on the prior identification of potentially harmful family relationships, to be addressed through ever earlier intervention. For example, the Family Nurse Partnerships scheme identifies unborn babies at risk of future social exclusion on the basis of their mother's background. Nurses are then allocated to these mothers, as early as 16 weeks into their pregnancy, to train them in parenting skills. Inherited from the previous Labour administration, Family Nurse Partnerships have formed a cornerstone of the new Conservative led Coalition Government's 'early intervention' strategy.

7.4 This emphasis on protection and prevention has also increasingly been shaped to fit more traditional right wing sensibilities in relation to family and social deprivation. Current political rhetoric centres on the concept of 'Broken Britain' and the need to tackle parenting as a root cause of child poverty as well as crime, with family intervention explicitly presented as an alternative to raising family incomes (see Field 2010; Allen and Duncan Smith 2008). Such accounts rehearse many of the neoliberal contentions associated with the underclass debate of the 1980s but crucially the emotionally potent vision of children as victims of neglect is emphasised alongside concerns about disorder and the burden to the public purse. Poor children are portrayed as missing out on essential nurturing disadvantaging them in later life. As the British Prime Minister, David Cameron has asserted 'poverty of parenting' is of greater concern than poverty of income, claiming that 'differences in child outcomes between a child born in poverty and a child born in wealth are no longer statistically significant when both have been raised by "confident and able" parents'[8].

The targeting of family practices

8.1 The foregrounding of wellbeing largely positions children as passive 'selves in the making', but they are also increasingly being appropriated as active agents in a more general targeting of family practices by Governments. As part of the new concern with family competence, particular aspects of domestic life have become highly politicised and evaluated in terms of right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy. Family diet, leisure practices, and relationship dynamics, alongside energy use within the home are now areas through which competence, skill and moral worth is explicitly judged. Children are actively drawn into this process via school projects and even direct television advertising. For example, some schools have invested in the

'Health Passports' initiative requiring children to keep an online health and lifestyle diary. Children are encouraged to reflect on their diets and leisure time activities in order to identify 'targets' for change, thereby challenging and re-shaping family routines. The deliberate aiming of television appeals at children is another notable trend. For example, in 2009 as part of the Government sponsored 'Act on CO2 campaign'[9] a public information style advertisement was aired at family viewing times in the format of a bed time story to convey the serious consequences of global warming. Children watching were implicitly encouraged to question their parents about the actions that they can take as family to reduce their carbon footprint.

8.2 Just as parenting has apparently transmogrified from a relationship to a goal orientated practice, other family and personal ties are being similarly reframed and targeted by governments. Couple relationships are increasingly viewed as requiring intervention either to preserve them or manage their dissolution. Emphasis is now placed on preventative 'relationship education' in schools and registry offices have begun to provide preliminary 'marriage preparation' advice before they conduct the ceremony. The notion that relationships require the application of particular knowledge and skills has also been extended to a range of family roles. The long established UK couple counselling organisation Relate has widened its remit and now provides services to a diverse range of families and family members. There has also been a significant expansion in family mediation services publicly funded through the legal aid system.

8.3 The Conservative led Coalition Government in the UK have demonstrated particularly strong enthusiasm for the concept of relationship support, investing an extra 30 million pounds to develop new provision, in the context of deep cuts to already existing public services. This reflects a subtle but distinct shift in conservative family rhetoric to embrace a competence model alongside more traditional investments and values. While marriage and the commitment it embodies is still extolled, politically sanctioned definitions have ostensibly been widened to include civil partnerships. David Cameron is noticeably careful to preface his references to marriage with 'whether between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman or a man and another man'[10]. More significantly, policy has focused on ensuring family breakdowns are better managed. For example, a review of family law has been initiated to examine, amongst other things, how couples can be encouraged to use mediation and how access rights of non resident parents and grandparents can be strengthened.

8.4 David Cameron has also enthusiastically endorsed the Australian Government's decision to set up 'Family Relationship Centres all across the country.[11] These exist to provide 'all families (whether together or separated) with access to information about family relationship issues, ranging from building better relationships to dispute resolution'[12] Their website is divided into separate sections for children, teenagers, parents, couples, and grandparents, and contains advice such as '10 steps you can take to maximise your relationships so that you feel valued, loved and nurtured, and to minimise becoming a relationship casualty'. Emphasis has also been placed on identifying 'pro relationship behaviours' including practices of 'sacrifice' and 'forgiveness' (Parker and Pattenden 2009).

8.5 Particular family based events are also commonly viewed and evaluated in terms of competence and appropriate behaviours. For example, in a 2006 speech to the Family and Parenting Institute, David Cameron described how

> 'Some relationship experts describe the moment of childbirth as the 'Magic Moment' which can either play a key part in bonding a couple and increasing parental responsibility.....or is a missed opportunity which leaves a couple drifting further apart and on a downward spiral. Making sure that both parents are really engaged at the moment of birth is therefore important'.

8.6 More mundane daily practices such as the consumption of food have similarly been identified as key measures of family proficiency, chiefly through the valorisation of the family mealtimes around a table. For example, in 2005 the BBC carried a 'warning' from 'parenting experts of':

> a growing number of feral TV dinner toddlers unable to use a knife and fork, and isolated teenagers who take their meals from the freezer, to the microwave and up to the bedroom without a word to anyone. All because many families no longer eat together.[13]

8.7 What families do inside and outside the home readily translates into markers of perceived failure or success, with activities such as takeaway consumption, watching television and playing computer games unfavourably contrasted with home cooking, visits to museums and engagement with school and after school activities. The extent to which these practices have become moralised is particularly relevant to the body of theoretical work developing around 'display' as a core analytical tool for understanding family (Finch 2007, Almack 2008, James and Curtis 2010, Dermott and Seymour 2001). Arguably, family competence is increasingly being judged through a display of the 'correct' practices.

Exemplification of 'incompetent' families

9.1 This evaluative approach to family and relationship practices is powerfully underscored by a drive to expose, learn from and often punish those deemed incompetent. The past demonization of lone mothers has been well documented (Duncan and Edwards 1999) but this goes beyond a fixation with family structure and instead focuses on explicit content. There appears to be less general concern over the diversification of families and greater anxiety about the quality and management of relationships and family practices. This was particularly evident in the aftermath of the English riots in 2011, with social commentators and politicians widely citing youth disorder as evidence of the existence of a crisis in parenting skills. While lone mothering was once again implicated as a primary cause, accusations focused more explicitly on the actions and motivations of parents, with particular concern expressed over their failure to keep rioting children and young people under tighter supervision.

9.2 Contemporary depictions of 'bad' families are extensive and span a cultural range, including reality television programmes like Supernanny (and its many spin offs and imitators), newspaper reports of 'families from Hell', confessional reality shows like Jerry Springer and Jeremy Kyle, TV dramas (for instance 'Shameless[14]') and the genre of biographical literature frequently dubbed 'misery lit'[15]. These representations tend to hone in and detail the damaged and damaging consequences of defective family

practices, generating an implicit and sometimes explicit moral commentary. For example, the popular 'Supernanny' format shows hapless parents struggling to manage defiant, badly behaved children. The programme's style is pedagogic, with an identical moral narrative structuring each episode. While the parents appearing on Supernanny (and the other similar programmes) are shown to 'redeem' themselves through education and training, other representations of 'incompetent families' exemplify a more intractable moral as well as practical deficit. 'Problem' families have been placed at the centre of a contemporary anxiety about 'anti-social behaviour'. In the last few years there has been a tendency for specific families to be singled out by the media and branded 'families from Hell'. Such depictions are deeply classed and are sometimes explicitly racialised[16]. Names, addresses and photographs are published alongside detailed accounts of their alleged misdemeanours which tend to include being loud and terrorising their communities. Families accused in this way commonly (although not always) have school age children who are described as 'running wild'.

9.3 Public policy in the UK has fuelled and fed into anxiety about families gone 'bad' by introducing a series of progressively authoritarian measures. For example, specialist 'family intervention projects' were introduced in 2006 with some providing residential supervision and guidance to 'grip families and use enforcement action and intensive help' (Home Office 2006). The subsequent Conservative led administration have since made a similar pledges to reform problem families through intensive support,[17] with this theme forming a centre piece of the Government's 'social fightback' initiative after the English riots. Urgent action was promised to tackle the families that 'everyone in their neighbourhood knows and often avoids', through a specific promise to 'turn around the lives of the 120,000 most troubled families in the country. In contrast to previous normative depictions of functional, harmonious nuclear family units, contemporary family ideology appears to operate largely through exemplification of 'chaotic', inept families. The effect of this goes far beyond the specific requirements placed on these families themselves, with the general public co-opted into the surveillance and policing of both their own and other people's family lives.

Reclaiming the concept of family

10.1 While the changes I have identified are increasingly gaining the attention of sociologists there are substantial gaps in knowledge about their meaning and consequences for everyday people's lives. This may partly be because the lens of intimacy and personal relationships renders many of these changes invisible. The language and focus of this approach chimes with the broader political and ideological shifts I have outlined. The therapeutic turn, the foregrounding of the individual and the embracing of diversity go with rather than against the political grain, generating little traction for more critical analysis of current agendas around family. The decentring of family has also entailed a decentring of childrearing (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2002), diverting the attention of sociologists from a core and deeply politicised activity. This does not undermine the interesting and important work being produced from the perspective of intimacy and personal relationships, but it does highlight the need for more radical analyses from the distinctly social perspective of family. In short, critically reclaiming family as a central organising concept (alongside personal lives) is necessary in order to address crucial personal, public and political dimensions.

10.2 The potential to engage critically with family as a conceptual tool derives from its durable elasticity and ability to contain a broad, often conflicting array of hopes, investments and interests. Family, as a pliable but historically located framework is best able to demonstrate how continuity is interlaced with change. Contemporary family discourse spans a wide repertoire, invoking traditional ideals alongside modern re-workings. For example, the new and old politics of family are inextricably intertwined, with many apparently progressive moves concealing enduring inequalities and values. Family friendly' policy developments have been introduced against a backdrop of concern about working mothers' and the wellbeing of their children, marriage is still lauded as a gold standard against which other couple relationships are viewed as lacking, and political family rhetoric remains deeply heterocentric. For all the claims made about individualisation and democratisation, values and practices of trust and caring in families still reflect ingrained identities and power relationships.

10.3 The matrix of taken for granted meanings and naturalised assumptions family spans are contradictory, fluid and shifting, encompassing a wide range of understandings and actions. Yet, as is the case for all social categories and identities, the discourse of family constructs experiences and representations of the world that have 'a reality almost as coercive as gravity' (Parker 1992). It is that 'reality' that requires untangling through a focus on the ways in which family is 'knowledged' into being (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 1992). Adopting the language and lens of family illuminates its extensive reach and power both to shape and be shaped by lived lives. From this perspective the troubled and contested nature of family might be viewed as a conceptual strength, allowing exploration of the contrasting and overlapping ways in which it is experienced and appropriated. Attempts to bypass the emotional and ideological connotations associated with family to some extent miss the point. The resilience of this 'baggage' is precisely why we should continue to study family.

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Notes

[1] As reported by Children & Young People Now http://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/ByDiscipline/Social-Care/942450/Labour-conference-Families-green-paper-support-relationships/

[2] Similar arguments might also be constructed around the concepts of race and gender.

[3] The ESRC funded Parenting Cultures seminar series and Monitoring Parents' conferences organised by Ellie Lee and colleagues are notable exceptions (see Faircloth and Lee 2010 in this journal).

[4] See www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Schoolslearninganddevelopment/Gettinginvolvedwithschoolsandyourchildseducation/DG_190880

[5] The extended schools programme, introduced as part of this agenda further challenges home school boundaries with some children spending between 8am and 6pm at school engaged in range of activities.

[6] A policy enforced for example at Danegrove Primary School in Barnet, North London.

[7] This was common practice for schools taking part in the ESRC funded project Disruptive Behaviour in the Classroom: Exploring the Social Subjectivity of Disaffection RES-061-23-0073

[8] David Cameron, Supporting Families Speech, January 11 2010 < http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/01/David_Cameron_Supporting_parents.aspx >

[9] See http://actonco2.direct.gov.uk/home.html

[10] See for example, David Cameron, Supporting Families Speech, January 11 2010 http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/01/David_Cameron_Supporting_parents.aspx>

[11] David Cameron's The Conservative leader's address to the National Family and Parenting Institute 2006 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/jun/20/immigrationpolicy.socialexclusion>

[12] See <http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au>

[13]< http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4551727.stm >

[14] Shameless is a BAFTA award-winning British drama television series featuring a dysfunctional working class family.

[15] Misery lit describes biographical literature in which an abusive and tragic childhood is described.

[16]£1m neighbours from hell: Meet the gipsy family terrorising an entire street <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1206652/The-1m-neighbours-hell-Meet-gipsy-family-terrorising-peaceful-street.html#ixzz0UMwmnmup>

[17] See transcript of a speech given by Prime Minister David Cameron to Relate in Leeds about families on 10 December 2010 <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/12/speech-on-families-and-relationships-58035>

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